

# *the* **GOOD SHEPHERD**

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**FORTY  
BIBLICAL  
INSIGHTS  
ON LEADING  
AND BEING LED**

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**TIM LANIAK**



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*The Good Shepherd: Forty Biblical Insights on Leading and Being Led*

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# INTRODUCTION

*Hey Mister! . . . What is there to research about us? We are nothing! Just spend our lives running after sheep and goats. Neither home, nor an address. Sleeping under the open sky, in winter, summer, and rains. . . . Year after year we measure the length of roads by our feet, carrying cooking utensils on camels and mules. Can't even rest in one place for a week. Why waste time, then, yours and ours?*

Arun Agrawal, *Greener Pastures*

These are the words of young shepherds trying to make sense of an outsider studying their way of life. They find their lives marginal and enigmatic, so why study them? Paradoxically, here on the fringes of society, a marginalized vocation older than civilization holds the key to understanding leadership in our own day. Not just leadership generally but biblical leadership.

The following pages provide personal access into the lives of real shepherds. Shepherds from many countries across the Middle East and beyond. Shepherds from many historical periods.<sup>1</sup> The kinds of shepherds the Bible makes much of. This book resulted from my own journey into these lives, searching for the context and meaning of the persistent pastoral imagery in Scripture. I wanted firsthand exposure to the cultural fabric of this central metaphor chosen to convey profound and timeless truths about leadership.

The opportunity came when I took a sabbatical at the W. F.

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Albright Institute for Archaeological Research in Jerusalem. Mixing library research with field interviews in Israel, Jordan, and the Sinai, I began to unlock the metaphor that has enlightened the work of leaders for millennia. I grew to love the deserts and wildernesses where Bedouin<sup>2</sup> tribes raise their flocks. I am indebted to so many for taking me into their tents and opening up their worlds to me. Their comments on the everyday world of shepherd work began to shape my understanding of biblical passages on leadership in unexpected ways.

Through this book I invite fellow Christians to trek into the wilderness and reflect together on our lives and work as shepherds. Seize this opportunity to reflect on your Divine Shepherd and your calling as his field hand. Ideally, set aside forty days for this journey. We'll begin each day with a brief chapter, each including photographs, excerpts from interviews, scriptural insights, and thought-provoking questions. Let this book guide your personal sojourn in the wilderness.

Forty is a significant number in the Bible, especially in desert settings. Moses spent forty days fasting on top of Mount Sinai while God wrote out the sacred charter for his people. Israel spent forty years in a desolate wilderness, deprived of life's basics so that they might learn dependence on God and his word. Forty years in an environment intentionally chosen by God to reveal his will and character—and to shape human will and character. Jesus spent forty days at the beginning of his ministry in a wilderness. Forty days in fasting and solitary prayerful reflection. Perhaps you may choose to fast in some way during this period.

The wilderness is where God revealed himself repeatedly as Provider, Protector, and Guide. These three primary roles of a shepherd will organize the overall structure of our reflections. You'll find thirteen chapters devoted to each.

The chapters begin with Observations (marked by the staff symbol) about some aspect of traditional shepherd life, continue with Investigations (marked by the scroll symbol) into related Bible passages, and conclude with Implications (marked by the sandal symbol) including questions and contemporary scenarios for our continued reflection. You will undoubtedly generate other insights and questions of your own. Record these in "The Tent" forum at [www.ShepherdLeader.com](http://www.ShepherdLeader.com) or keep a written journal, detailing applications for your own leadership setting.

Although this book has obvious and direct relevance for pastors and elders, I often use the terms *leader* and *community* to avoid restricting the implications to congregational life. Believers who serve in positions of responsibility in any setting will find the content relevant. Because organized or unorganized, large or small, every group is a community. And every community has leaders. And all leaders are shepherds. Pastors and politicians. Corporate executives and stay-at-home parents. Chaplains and coaches. Teachers and hospice workers. Construction supervisors and county commissioners. Virtually

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all of us are shepherds, responsible to God for the way we lead those in our care. Pastors should be thinking of their congregations not only as sheep (and goats!) but also as shepherds working among their own flocks.



My experience as a shepherd includes a wide variety of venues. I've led children's clubs, youth groups, neighborhood Bible studies, and evangelistic outreaches. I've managed a home for international students and welfare housing for elderly immigrants. I've started nonprofit organizations and served on their boards. I've taught in the United States, Europe, and Asia, serving with para-church organizations, denominations, and local churches. I've been training seminary students for decades, marveling at the amazing diversity of communities to which God has called shepherd leaders. I must admit that the most challenging setting for my own shepherding has been at home. The implications in this book very often confronted me first quite personally in the context of my marriage and family life.

In the pages that follow, you will not simply be soothed by inspirational thoughts and pictures of pastoral scenes. The

Bible does not offer the shepherd metaphor as an exercise in literary artistry but rather to teach about leadership. Divine leadership and human leadership. In fact, shepherd imagery is used mostly in critiques of poor human leadership. The verbal pictures—grounded in cultural realities—help create an inescapable standard for responsible leadership. These pictures spoke to the original audiences in the most serious terms. Like parables, metaphors compel a person to think, to feel, and to act differently. The metaphor of the shepherd leader still makes its comprehensive challenge today. Please join me in embracing this challenge.



*As a bride you loved me and followed  
me through the wilderness.*

Jeremiah 2:2





## THE WILDERNESS



Our first impression of deserts and wilderness is visual monotony. Shadows crawl across the stone-strewn valleys. The sand-colored terrain is bleached in searing sunlight. Only after settling into its unhurried rhythm will you recognize subtle, continuous changes. Scattered vegetation surfaces around hidden moisture sources. Animals that hide during the day emerge at dusk. The star-studded night highlights surreal contours in the landscape. In time you become mesmerized by the vast and barren grandeur.

While a desert landscape can lure the newcomer into a romantic trance, we soon discover that this environment is fierce and inhospitable, known for drastic extremes. Its heat can overwhelm, as I once learned dramatically. Our team of four left Jerusalem before dawn to hike to a remote monastery in the Judean Wilderness. Our chosen route was the Kidron Valley, the setting for the Good Samaritan story. It was a blistering July morning, and by ten o'clock I was dehydrated in nature's furnace. "There was fire around, and fire beneath, and overhead the sun."<sup>1</sup> Our water bottles were empty. The oranges

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were finished. So were we. *Khalas*, in Arabic. “Finished.” The Bedouin say, “The pail of thirst has no rope.”<sup>2</sup>

Arriving in the suffocating heat with a full-blown migraine, I collapsed in the shade of the monastery’s entryway. My only hope to get out was a *sherut* (contract taxi) that pulled in at noon. Packed with French tourists with a round-trip fare, there was no room for a sick hiker. I pleaded for space—even in the trunk. And one hour later I rode out, slung over their bags, holding the trunk open, gasping for air. The temperature was a piping 125 degrees Fahrenheit.

Unbelievably, desert temperatures may drop over 80 degrees in the dead of winter. The furnace becomes a freezer. Restless and shivering, tent dwellers stoke their fires through sleepless nights. At dawn, shepherds wonder what they’ve surrendered to the icy darkness. In the severe winter of 1945–1946, nomads of Algeria lost half of their herds to freezing. A sober bystander recalls a similar tragedy in Palestine: “I still remember how those poor sheep . . . died in dozens while their owners stood looking at them, being unable to do anything for them.”<sup>3</sup> The desert is a place of death.

Temperature changes are bearable, but not when accompanied by the desert’s most dreaded plague—drought. Years may pass with only drops of dew for moisture. In the territories of the Bedouin, adequate rain may fall on an average of three years in ten. Between 1958 and 1961 Syria lost 50 percent of its sheep and 85 percent of its camels to rainless winters. One poet pined,

Singed by the flames of a hot breeze from the  
south, . . .  
Emaciated animals in a drought-stricken land;  
The flames of the blistering heat are licking their  
hearts;  
They have nothing to eat, except charred branches of  
the *wahat*-tree.<sup>4</sup>

*Hamsin* is another capricious seasonal phenomenon. This dreaded sand hurricane can blow through a camp for days, decimating any unprotected life. As one anthropologist observes, “You see fine specks of soil surging and colliding together, grains and specks that lash the face like a whip, parch the throat, and sap the strength of one’s soul. The rising dust blinds the eyes, and the animals wander in lost confusion.”<sup>5</sup>

The landscape heightens the danger by its deceptive capacity to look both familiar and unfamiliar at every turn. One can get lost just minutes from the tents or wander far from home and never know it.



The wilderness is featured in many biblical narratives. The Sinai Peninsula, the Negev, and the Wildernesses of Zin, Paran, and Judah are arid zones where fugitives like Moses and David fled, and where Jesus escaped to pray.

Yet even the most desolate desert offered a spiritual oasis for calling, revelation, and intimacy. The root of the Hebrew word for “wilderness,” *midbar*, means “word.”

After four decades of trudging in this rugged terrain, the shepherd Moses met God on his sacred mountain home. Moses was summoned to bring Israel out of slavery from Egypt’s oppressive society back to this remote mountain where God would give his people words of life.

After receiving God’s laws on Sinai, Moses shepherded God’s human flock for forty years in the wild Negev, where dependence on God was imperative.

Remember how the LORD your God led you all  
the way in the wilderness these forty years. . . . He  
humbled you, causing you to hunger and then feeding

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you with manna . . . to teach you that man does not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of the LORD. (Deuteronomy 8:2–3)

The prophet Hosea understood that God deliberately lured his people into desert regions where he “proposed” to them (Hosea 2:14–16). Only in this remote, isolated environment would they be able to comprehend his love for them—and their desperate need for him.

The ministry of Jesus was inaugurated with a display of divine affirmation at the Jordan River. The Holy Spirit descended on him like a dove but then abruptly led him into the wilderness to endure severe temptation. Symbolically, Jesus relived the challenge that God’s people had once failed. Matching their forty years, Jesus spent forty days sustained exclusively by God’s word. Biblically, the wilderness is a place of dependent, disciplined, purifying solitude where God must be trusted. Deserts bring people quickly to the end of their self-sufficiency and independence.

The wilderness is also associated with wild expectations. It is the *tohu wavohu* (“formlessness and void”)<sup>6</sup> into which God speaks a new creation. The prophetic promises for a dramatic renewal of exiled Israel were framed by images of a flower-carpeted desert coursing with rushing streams of living water. Jesus’s ministry paved a “way . . . in the desert” (Isaiah 40:3), a spiritually barren landscape where threatened and thirsty people panted for a new Eden.





The lives of leaders can become a wilderness when experiences expose our frail and tenuous existence. Episodes of bewilderment, abandonment, and inner terror reveal our soul's restless cravings and fundamental neediness.

In the wilderness we can lose our bearings.

Or regain them.

The wilderness can be such a catalyst for good that we may voluntarily create one for the purpose of recharging our relationship with God. We can block out the calendar and unplug the technological gadgets for some uninterrupted time in a setting that isolates us in his presence. This journal could reflect a deliberate, intentional choice to meet with God.

Let's prepare for our journey by expecting God to reveal his word, to provide insight into our souls, and to purge us spiritually in this divinely chosen furnace. We need to leave our "stuff" behind, removing every distraction, and prepare for stillness. God will honor our choice to meet him alone in the wilderness during these forty days.

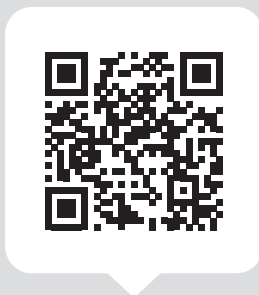
## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**T**im Laniak (ThD, Harvard University) made his first trip to the Middle East in 1978 and has enjoyed opening up the history and cultures of the biblical world to students and leaders ever since. He and his wife, Maureen, have lived in Israel and occasionally guide study tours to the region. This book contains insights gleaned primarily from a year of field research while on sabbatical from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary (Charlotte, North Carolina), where Tim served as dean, professor of Old Testament, and mentor for the Christian Leadership Doctor of Ministry Program. He is currently senior vice president of global content for Our Daily Bread Ministries.




Laniak has authored several books including *Shepherds after My Own Heart: Pastoral Traditions and Leadership in the Bible*; *Shame and Honor in the Book of Esther*; the New International Biblical Commentary on the book of Esther; and *Handbook for Hebrew Exegesis*. Visit his website at [www.ShepherdLeader.com](http://www.ShepherdLeader.com).

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